

# Unity in Jesus: An Analysis of Perfection and Imperfection in Knowledge



**Thrust Statement:** Salvation is not contingent upon absolute perfection in knowledge.

**Scripture Reading:** [2 Timothy 2:15](#); [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#); [Romans 14 and 15](#).

Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name. The reformers of every age, whether political or religious or literary, have protested against the tyranny of the dead, and in doing so have called for innovation and insight in place of tradition.<sup>[1]</sup>

This essay is designed to assist elders, preachers, and members within the Churches of Christ to become more adept in correctly handling the Word of God ([2 Timothy 2:15](#)).<sup>[2]</sup> In order to accomplish this goal, it is my intention to share with leaders and members the tools needed to recapture the art of how to read the Bible in order to maintain the unity for which Jesus prayed in His priestly prayer ([John 17:20-23](#)). This article analyzes Paul's handling of differences within the congregations at Rome and Corinth. This brief analysis of Unity in Jesus demonstrates that imperfection in understanding does not, in and of itself, warrant the stigma of false prophets as a result of misinterpretation—a term frequently employed by many well-meaning Christians. Also this paper discusses the failure on the part of many Christians in their oversight to differentiate between certain views that have contributed to a breakdown of unity among God's people.

To illustrate the importance of the unity for which Jesus prayed, Paul is called upon to emphasize the urgency of the matter. It is in this regard that Paul pleaded with Christians at Ephesus to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” ([Ephesians 4:3](#)). This mandate is essential on the part of every believer in order to fulfill the prayer of Jesus for unity so that the world may believe. Not only did Paul plead with the Ephesians, he also encouraged the Christians in Rome to “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” ([Romans](#)

15:7).

Since God accepted them with imperfection in their lives and in their knowledge, then Paul called upon them to exercise the same kind of love and forbearance toward their fellow Christians for whom Christ died. Many devout Christians do not realize the purpose of Jesus' prayer because they do not discern who is or who is not a false prophet in the light of the context of Matthew's narrative. Jesus prayed for oneness and Paul also called for union. This paper explores ways to bring about the fulfillment of Jesus' and Paul's prayer for singularity of purpose.

Since my personal ministry is primarily confined within the parameters of the Churches of Christ, I feel that a part of my ministry is to help correct the abuses of God's Word handed down to us from our forefathers within the Churches of Christ. This movement (Campbell/Stone) started out as a unity movement, but soon crystallized into warring factions, each promoting its own brand of Christianity.<sup>[3]</sup> Today, for example, within the Churches of Christ, one soon discovers that there are approximately twenty-five divisions—each claiming to be the loyal church.

Each group maintains that it is speaking where the Bible speaks and is silent where the Bible is silent. For one not to subscribe to the orthodoxy of a particular group is to receive the label false prophet. Whenever a distinctive religious group sets forth its interpretation of a singular Scripture, then for one to disagree with that traditional exposition is tantamount to disagreeing with God Himself. In this philosophy of explanation, one does not distinguish between one's critique of God's Word and the Word of God itself. If one group sets forth a perception of Scripture that does not conform to the status quo of another camp, then the "at odds" fellowship is accused of not speaking where the Bible speaks.

Unity among many Churches of Christ is based upon conformity, not unity in diversity.<sup>[4]</sup> But numerous Churches of Christ are returning to the Biblical concept of unity in diversity. And, as a result of this stance on unity in diversity by many elders and preachers, the unity in conformity group labels the unity in diversity fellowship as false teachers or liberal brethren.<sup>[5]</sup>

Today, the Churches of Christ are hopelessly engaged in combat. These skirmishes are based upon a faulty reading of many Scriptures that are employed as means of justification for separation from other Christians. One such Scripture is **Matthew 7:15**: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."<sup>[6]</sup>

In order to combat this loose type of explanation, it is necessary for me to expound upon the principles of examination to combat an illegal use of Scriptures to foster division. The Word of God provides its own environment for a proper understanding of its teachings. This essay accepts the presupposition that false prophets are not necessarily individuals who fail to make clear the Scriptures, but rather the false prophets are individuals whose ethical behavior is not in harmony with God's law. To accomplish this target of correctly identifying the false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew, as cited above, one must learn how to read the Scriptures with understanding—especially narrative interpretation.<sup>[7]</sup>

In other words, one must study in detail the context in which the phrase “false prophets” occurs, otherwise, this lack of understanding may present one with obstacles that might hinder a proper application of a healthy understanding as to whom the phrase false prophets designates. This in-depth development of context<sup>[8]</sup> is essential for proper growth and development and unity in God’s *ekklesia* (church). To facilitate the usefulness of contextual studies, this paper briefly explores two congregations in biblical times in which differences existed in order to help believers in Christ today to determine how Christians should react to similar circumstances in which deficiency in knowledge was prevalent.

## THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Within the Churches of Christ, the epithet “false prophet” is assigned to individuals who do not subscribe to a particular interpretation of a distinctive fellowship. Correctness in doctrine, according to some, is the measurement of right standing before God. Imperfection in one’s knowledge calls forth the title of false prophet. Since this study is concerned about unity in Jesus, then the proper identification of false prophets in the Gospel of Matthew should help to dispel an incorrect classification as to who is and who is not a false prophet in Matthew’s gospel.

Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not making allowances for shortcomings in understanding among some believers in the congregation. Paul calls attention in his first letter to Corinth to a wrong perception of correctness as the criterion by which one is placed in a right relationship with God.

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God (**1 Corinthians 8:1-3**).

Paul did not castigate those with imperfection in knowledge as false teachers/prophets. As one peruses the various citations from Scripture, one immediately recognizes that deformity in knowledge does not necessarily mean that one is a false teacher. In the Corinthian letter, Paul is clearly dealing with insufficient knowledge and one’s relationship to God—a relationship based upon love, not upon absolute knowledge.

Paul develops in the Corinthian letter the concept that God loves the person with limited knowledge as well as the person with clear insight. With Paul, as long as one loves God—in spite of deficiency in aptitude—this person is acceptable to God. The “intent of the heart” does play an important role in deciding who is and who is not acceptable to God. Paul further demonstrates the principle of love and relationship in the following comments about idols and one’s belief system:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. But not everyone knows this (**1**

Corinthians 8:4-7a).

## THE ROMAN CHURCH

To set the stage for sounder principles of hermeneutics, a brief reflection upon **Romans 14** and **15** should shed further light on how Paul reacted toward those whose knowledge was deficient. In these two chapters, Paul deals with those who wanted to make exact interpretation the criterion by which one determines one's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God. The **first four verses of chapter 14** demonstrate forcefully Paul's attitude in this matter of reception and rejection. Paul captures this spirit of patience in graphic language in this letter to Rome.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand (**Romans 14:1-4**).

Paul did not accuse the misinformed as being false prophets/teachers, but rather he rebuked those who passed judgment on those who were mistaken. God can make one stand even with deformity in one's knowledge.

## DIFFERENTIATION OF CONCEPTS

This essay seeks to eliminate the confusion of certain terms that encourages and promotes division within the Churches of Christ. In not distinguishing between certain terms exercised by the Spirit, many Christians have brought about chaos in the *ekklesia* of God and are hopelessly divided into numerous camps. Part of the problem lies with the failure to differentiate adequately between terms employed by various branches within the Churches of Christ. For example, one's delinquency in not differentiating between *unity* and *fellowship*, *unity* and *conformity*, *fellowship* and *agreement*, *gospel* and *doctrine*, and *fellowship* and *endorsement* has contributed to a proliferation of sects within the Churches of Christ. And an inexact use of the above terms continues to uphold the orthodoxy of each divided circle. Thus, when one does not make proper applications of the various phrases employed among many Christians, then this lack of proper differentiation contributes to an abuse of the phrase "false prophets."

By distinguishing between specific key phrases adopted by many, this clarification of understanding will help to clear away the underbrush that prevents Christians from properly interpreting false prophets in the Book of Matthew. By eliminating certain presuppositions, one can approach the text without a lot of excess baggage. The following scenario is a brief analysis of the various cliches employed by many well-meaning Christians to uphold their brand of orthodoxy. This paper seeks to awaken within every individual a correct understanding of the numerous rigid formulas in order to promote the unity for which Jesus prayed and to correctly identify the false prophets that He warned against.

## Unity and Fellowship

Some leaders within the Churches of Christ do not make a distinction between *unity* and *fellowship*. According to some Christians, unity is founded upon fellowship of agreement, not unity created by the Holy Spirit. Many Christians advocate that the unity of the Spirit is as a result of fellowship with other believers in the same interpretative community,<sup>[9]</sup> but this philosophy is not Biblical.<sup>[10]</sup> Unity is that which the Holy Spirit creates, not man. It is the Spirit's unity.<sup>[11]</sup> In fact, Paul writes, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (**Ephesians 4:3**). In other words, Paul says, "spare no effort." To what end? Not to produce a unity, not to create a unity, not to try to arrive at a unity, but to keep the unity. This unity is already in existence. It is unity of all those who believe and respond to the message of redemption expounded in **chapters 1—3 of Ephesians**. In other words, fellowship is a fruit of unity, not unity a fruit of fellowship. Carl Ketcherside is therefore right when he says,

The Spirit introduces all of the obedient believers into one body and thus forms an active fellowship of all who respond to the Good News. He does this without regard for nation or social distinctions. He generates a vital unity of all who are regenerated.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Unity and Conformity

Again, Christians must differentiate between *unity* and *conformity*. Within the Christian community, Christians have sought to base a superstructure of religion upon attainment to a certain degree of knowledge and wisdom. The traditional concept of unity is based upon conformity in knowledge and wisdom.<sup>[13]</sup> But, it goes almost without saying that conformity in the absolute demands equal ability of perception, simultaneous arrival at perfection in knowledge, and universality of wisdom. Alexander Campbell drove home this point extremely well when he penned:

It is cruel to excommunicate a man because of the imbecility of his intellect. I have been censured long and often for laying too much stress upon the assent of the understanding; but those who have most acrimoniously censured me, have laid much more stress upon the assent of the mind than I have ever done. I never did, at any time exclude a man from the kingdom of God for a mere imbecility of intellect; or, in other words, because he could not assent to my opinions.<sup>[14]</sup>

The unity for which Jesus prayed is not external organizational unity. This unity is the unity of persons. It is a fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with all those who believe. This means that the unity in the *ekklesia* of God involves this fellowship of being. When one is born again, born of the Spirit, or becomes a partaker of the divine nature, this person shares in this unity for which Jesus prayed. And so He calls everyone into the fellowship through the Spirit (**1 Corinthians 12:13**). There can be no unity at all in our Lord's sense apart from the operation of the Holy Spirit who creates within every believer this new nature. Paul wrote: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (**1 Corinthians 12:13**). Jürgen Moltmann once said with his typical

pungency:

The unity of the congregation is a unity in freedom. It must not be confused with unanimity, let alone uniformity in perception, feeling or morals. No one must be regimented, or forced into conformity with conditions prevailing in the church. Everyone must be accepted with his gifts and tasks, his weaknesses and handicaps. This unity is an evangelical unity, not a legal one. [\[15\]](#)

### **Fellowship and Agreement**

Another concept that divides many within the Churches of Christ is that some do not make a separation between the terms *fellowship* and *agreement*. In many camps, if there is no agreement, then there is no fellowship. Leaders and members throughout Churches of Christ are now realizing that fellowship does not come as a result of one's agreement upon matters of opinion and interpretation, but rather one's ability to reach agreement upon doctrinal issues comes as a result of fellowship. Christians are not one in opinion; they are one in Christ. One does not become a child of God through study, acquisition of knowledge, learning of the law, or skill as teacher but through procreation—not through education. Ketcherside is quite correct in observing that

As God accepted us in our weakness, with mistaken ideas, warped views and unhealthful attitudes, so we must accept each other in the same state or condition. We must not make the kingdom of heaven to consist of our convictions, attitudes or opinions, but of citizens who must be tolerant of each other in such matters, else there can be no kingdom of heaven at all. [\[16\]](#)

### **Gospel and Doctrine**

Next, one must discriminate between *gospel* and *doctrine*, a separation drawn by the writers of the New Testament. There is as much difference between the gospel of Christ and the apostolic doctrine as there is between the sperm from which a child is begotten and the food that he eats after he is born. Paul knew the difference between the seed from which life came and the daily bread upon which the children fed. He knew the difference between gospel and doctrine and between faith and knowledge. He knew that the gospel brought one into being while the doctrine was essential to one's growth and well being; Paul did not make a test of fellowship out of spiritual digestion. [\[17\]](#) Those who confuse chastisement of a child with begetting and cannot distinguish between correction and conception are in a sad predicament. [\[18\]](#)

### **Fellowship and Endorsement**

Once more, one must distinguish between fellowship and endorsement, which is one of the major problems within the Churches of Christ. Many are under the impression that to have fellowship with one another is to endorse whatever the other person believes, which cannot be true. All Christians are in fellowship with God, but who is so foolish as to believe that God endorses everything a person believes or does? In Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" ([14:1](#)). Again, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" ([15:7](#)). But still, someone may ask, "Are you in



fellowship with error?” No, one is in fellowship with individuals. The question posed by many is: “Are you in fellowship with brothers in error?” One’s response must be “yes,” because that is the only kind of brothers and sisters one knows about. As Alexander Campbell has made clear:

So long as unity of opinion was regarded as a proper basis of religious union, so long have mankind been distracted by the multiplicity and variety of opinions. To establish what is called a system of orthodox opinions as the bond of union, was, in fact, offering a premium for new diversities in opinion, and for increasing, *ad infinitum*, opinions, sects, and divisions. . . . But the grandeur, sublimity, and beauty of the foundation of hope, and of ecclesiastical or social union, established by the author and founder of Christianity, consisted in this, that THE BELIEF OF ONE FACT, and that upon the best evidence in the world, is all that is requisite, as far as faith goes, to salvation. The belief of this ONE FACT, and submission to ONE INSTITUTION expressive of it, is all that is required of Heaven to admission into the church.<sup>[19]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to teach leaders and members of the Churches of Christ the true nature of unity. Also, this paper is designed to assist individuals in learning how to determine who is or is not a false prophet so that unity in Jesus may be maintained. If Christians are going to advocate unity in Jesus, the unity for which our Lord prayed, one must understand certain key terms in order to determine the foundation of unity. Since all Christians are under a mandate to “Be imitators of God . . . and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (**Ephesians 5:1-2**), it is imperative that everyone work toward making “every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (**4:3**).

My hypothesis is that when Christians are taught how to differentiate between certain key phrases, they will arrive at a correct understanding and identification of who the false prophets are in Matthew and, thus, maintain the unity for which Jesus prayed. My emphasis in this study has called attention to the “unity of the Spirit” that all Christians are to strive to uphold. Since Christians are to preserve this unity in all good consciousness, a number of cliches were analyzed to help clear away the underbrush or cobwebs in their thinking so that they do not violate their beliefs. This paper sought to assist individuals in eradicating fuzzy understanding in order to bring about an answer to Christ’s priestly prayer for unity (**John 17**).

Also, this essay explored the utter impossibility of making absolute perfection in knowledge the condition of salvation and fellowship. Since many Christians within the Churches of Christ advance unblemished perfection in knowledge of one’s party beliefs before they can extend the right hand of fellowship, Paul was called upon to see if this philosophy is what he taught before he extended friendly intercourse to other devoted saints. To refute faultlessness in knowledge as a prerequisite for association, this paper looked at two congregations (Corinth and Rome) in which differences existed in order to determine from a biblical perspective the mind-set to be exercised by Christians in similar circumstances today. In spite of disagreements within these two fellowships, Paul called for forbearance, not ostracism.

This paper is not designed to question the sincerity of those who disagree with the findings set forth in this brief study of Unity in Jesus, for these individuals, too, are seeking to be true to the Word of God. But, rather, it is to encourage individuals to become peacemakers, not piecemakers. In other words, Christians are to promote peace and harmony, not to fracture the body of Christ into warring factions.

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[1] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

[2] All Scripture citations are from the NIV, unless stated otherwise.

[3] See Thomas Campbell, "Declaration and Address," in C. A. Young, *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, reprint, 1985, 107, 108 where he writes in Proposition One: "That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else; as none else can be truly and properly called Christians."

[4] For an example of this mind-set, see Jerry Dickinson, "Unity in Diversity," *Old Paths Advocate* LXVII, no. 8 (August 1995): 1, 8-9. The one-cup, non-Sunday school, grape juice only, bread pinchers, and so on, publish this particular journal. See also Don L. King, "Proper Perspective," *Old Paths Advocate* LXVII, no. 9 (September 1995):2, 7. Billy D. Dickinson writes another insightful article that discloses the inner feelings of this peculiar fellowship, "False Teachers and Fellowship, *Old Paths Advocate* LXVIII, no. 10 (October 1995): 1, 9.

[5] See J. E. Choate, "The Baby Boomers and Unity in Diversity," *Firm Foundation* 108, no. 8 (August 1993): 18-20.

[6] See Dallas Burdette, "Who Are the False Prophets Within the Churches of Christ" [ON-LINE]. Available from [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net) [accessed 26 May 2000], located under caption BIBLICAL STUDIES, then under subheading GOSPEL OF MATTHEW for documentation to validate this distinctive use of Matthew 7:15 within the Churches of Christ.

[7] See Dallas Burdette, "A Literary Analysis of the Gospel of Matthew" [ON-LINE]. Available from [www.freedominchrist.net](http://www.freedominchrist.net) [accessed 26 May 2000], located under caption BIBLICAL STUDIES, then under subheading GOSPEL OF MATTHEW for the advantages of narrative application in seeking to understand the individual texts such as **Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24.**



[8] In order to ascertain the meaning that is attached to any word or phrase, one must examine the context. The word “context” is from Latin, which means to “weave together” and is applied to written documents. The context is the connection of thought that runs through every passage, which constitutes for itself a whole. The immediate context is that which immediately precedes or follows a given word, phrase, or sentence. Not only must the context be considered, but one must also investigate the scope and plan of the author.

[9] Interpretative communities are composed of members who share a particular reading “strategy,” or a “set of community assumption.” See M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993), 271. See also Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980). I have chosen to use “interpretative community” rather than “interpretive community” as employed by Fish.

[10] For a fuller explanation of these terms, see Dallas Burdette, “The ‘Is’ and ‘Is Not’ of Fellowship, *Restoration Review* 15, no. 10 (December 1973): 194-196.

[11] See Dallas Burdette, “The Spirit Makes Us One,” *Restoration Review* 16, no. 4 (April 1974): 276-277.

[12] Carl Ketcherside, “The Spirit and Unity,” *Mission Messenger* 25, no. 2 (July 1963): 3 [99]. To access all of the issues of *Mission Messenger* [On-Line], go to: [www.unity-in-diversity.org](http://www.unity-in-diversity.org)

[13] For an insightful article on unity, see Leroy Garrett, “Unity is God’s Gift,” *Restoration Review* 15, no. 8 (October 1973): 150-152. See also Carl Ketcherside, “The Spirit and Unity,” *Mission Messenger* 25, no. 7 (July 1963): 1-16.

[14] Alexander Campbell, “Millennium—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1, no. 4 (Monday, April 5, 1830): 13, 14.

[15] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 343.

[16] Carl Ketcherside, “Contrary to Doctrine,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 3 (March 1965): 4.

[17] See Dallas Burdette, “Restoring the Biblical Ideal of Preaching” in *Restoration Forum VIII* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1990), 147-155.

[18] See Carl Ketcherside, “Gospel and Doctrine,” *Mission Messenger* 27, no. 2 (February 1965): 1-11. I am indebted to Ketcherside for assisting me in a clearer understanding of the distinction between gospel and doctrine.

[19] Alexander Campbell, “The Foundation of Hope and of Christian Union,” *The*

*Christian Baptist* 1, no. 9 (April 5, 1824): 176, 177.